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Wyoming

Pepper Fire on Green Mountain—Reflections on a Fire

Teams of firefighters worked on the Pepper Fire on Green Mountain. The fire burned over 1,000 acres. What is left evokes a quiet eeriness; a stillness in the land as it anticipates renewal and rebirth.

BLM Rock Springs, Wyoming Public Affairs Specialist Rey Adame is the photographer.



Nature does nothing in vain. Aristotle, 320 B.C.

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The thornbush is the old obstacle in the road. It must catch fire if you want to go further. Franz Kafka, 1917



Nature knows no difference between weeds and flowers. Mason Cooley, aphorist, 1927

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There is a slumbering subterranean fire in nature which never goes out, and which no cold can chill. Henry David Thoreau

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Idaho

FireSmart Program - A Model Approach

Kootenai County, Idaho is actively working with private landowners to help clear shrubs, brush, and trees away from homes to protect them from the kind of wildfires scorching thousands of acres in other parts of the country. An innovative program called FireSmart designed and implemented at the local level is already providing benefits.



Thick northern Idaho vegetation added to potential for major wildfire.

Located in northern Idaho, Kootenai County has over 130,000 residents, with approximately 80,000 living and/or working in the heavily forested areas.

Several years ago the Local Emergency Planning Committee identified wildfire as the primary disaster risk. The potential for fires destroying homes and entire communities is significant.

FireSmart was designed as part of the county's wildland urban interface fire mitigation plan. Grant money totaling \$1.9 million was obtained from a variety of sources including the Idaho Department of Lands, Bureau of Land Management, National Fire Plan, Idaho Bureau of Disaster Services, Kootenai County Disaster Services, Idaho Department of Commerce and USDA-U.S. Forest Service.

FireSmart established two major goals. First, to increase awareness of the risk of wildfire in the wildland urban interface areas of the county, and second to help homeowners learn how to protect their homes by creating a survivable space.

The program provides a one-time service to reduce dangerous fuels, and educates homeowners on other things they can do to protect their homes from wildfires.

The success of FireSmart is due to its development and administration through the Kootenai County Local Emergency Planning Committee. This committee includes

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FireSmart planning and funding allows homeowners to reduce fuels and fire threat.

representatives from various federal, state and local governmental entities, private businesses and citizens. Goals and objectives for the program were developed. An implementation plan was written, steering committee organized, and two personnel positions were identified and filled.

The committee recognized that a project manager with technical forestry and private business management skills would be needed to implement a start-up

program of such magnitude. They hired Larry Isenberg, who brings 27 years of forestry background to the job. He is the primary on-site contact with the residents and has completed site inspections on over 250 homes in the last six weeks. Also hired was Lori Barnes as Assistant Project Manager with strong public relations and project management background.

For homeowners, the first step is usually a phone call to the FireSmart office where Lori explains the program, determines if they will qualify and then sends them a packet of information, along with a form they have to fill out and return. Their home is placed on the list for site inspection. To increase the effectiveness of the program, individuals who call in are encouraged to ask their neighbors to participate with them. This has led to entire communities learning about the need to reduce the fuel near their homes.

As a result of this process, FireSmart is currently working with two different communities to develop a survivable space around the perimeter of each.

Larry meets with the individual homeowner or neighborhood group, explains the program, and walks around the home and



A wildland urban interface home nearly obscured by vegetation.

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property with them to identify the dangerous fuels that need to be removed. Together they mark the trees that will be left and indicate which ones to remove. Larry suggests other things they can do to protect their homes from wildfire, such as adding screening under low decks, moving firewood piles, replacing junipers near the home with fire-resistant plants, and cleaning roofs and gutters.



FireSmart program that helped achieve a FireWise safe home.

Fourteen local contractors ranging in size from a one-person operation, to a diversified business with seven members, are used to help reduce fuels within 100 feet of the homes. The cost per home is from about \$800 to \$1,200. The cost is either paid for through the FireSmart program, or the homeowner is reimbursed for doing the work. As part of the program, homeowners agree to keep up the work for 10 years.

Larry explains, “The response from the homeowners is overwhelming. They are so appreciative of the help they are getting. They enthusiastically fix everything we recommend and do even more in many cases.”

The BLM Upper Columbia-Salmon Clearwater District in Coeur d’Alene, Idaho provided \$160,000 to Kootenai County in 2001 through an assistance agreement. This and other funding sources gave the FireSmart Kootenai County Program a kick-start as they began the fuel risk inventory and hazard assessment. An additional \$100,000 was provided by BLM in 2002 and helps fund the personnel to administer the program.

Brad Wagner, fuels technician in the Coeur d’Alene Field Office, has been an active steering committee member since the inception of the program. He said, “The committee researched numerous other programs throughout the country and incorporated all of the best ideas into one program. We feel we have a program that is top-notch.” He said, “The true measure of success is indicated by the number of other counties and communities that are looking at the FireSmart Kootenai County Program as a model.”

Shoshone, Benewah, and Bonner Counties in northern Idaho are also in the beginning stages of developing their county fire mitigation plans.

Contact: Brad Wagner, 208-769-5018

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Mark Anderson of the Kooskia Volunteer Fire Department and Bruce Martinek of BLM met to sign agreements under the Rural Fire Department grant program.

BLM Upper Columbia Salmon-Clearwater District

Coordination, Communication, Cooperation, and how the “Three C’s” are increasing wildland firefighting capability for BLM in north and central Idaho.

The Upper Columbia Salmon-Clearwater District administers land north of the Salmon River in Idaho that is steep and dense with timber. Many people joke about how a north Idaho acre can contain more tree species per acre than anywhere else in

the United States. BLM land in central Idaho reflects this with a vegetation shift from fire tolerant to fire prone tree species.

An issue for fire managers in this area is how to increase their wildland fire fighting capability while also providing for the maximum degree of safety for the firefighters on the fire lines.

One answer is with the U.S. Department of the Interior Rural Fire Assistance Program. Assistance Agreements are negotiated with rural fire departments servicing communities with populations of less than 10,000 residents. The program can fund fire prevention activities, fire vehicles, training, and personal protective equipment (fire resistant clothing). The highest priority for items that will boost the safety for personnel engaged in wildland fire fighting.

The first “C”, to increase wildland fire fighting capability in north and central Idaho, is for Coordination. In January 2002, Bruce Martinek, BLM’s rural fire coordinator, began assessing how to approach the agreements for 2002. The Rural Fire Assistance Program was newly formed in 2001 and, as with any new program, BLM was looking for the most efficient way to get dollars into the hands of the rural fire departments needing assistance.

The second “C”, Communication, started the ball rolling. In 2002, Bruce contacted, either personally or through mailings, 102 rural fire departments. He logged over 2,000

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miles traveling to the often-remote community fire departments to complete the assistance or Mutual Aid agreements.

The agreements initiated between BLM and individual departments allow them to compete for, and receive assistance for up to five years. Requests for assistance were received from 44 departments requesting \$482,060. BLM was faced with deciding how to distribute just \$160,000 to best meet the requests.

This is where the third “C” comes into play, Cooperation. On May 9, 2002, representatives from rural fire departments, Idaho Department of Lands, the Forest Service and BLM met to review the assistance applications. A ranking and prioritization process was developed resulting in awards for 31 departments. Those receiving funding are required to provide a 10% cost share contribution of either cash or in-kind services, such as hours spent on training firefighters. The grants can be used by the rural fire departments to purchase items such as radios, personal protective equipment, shovels, water pumps, hose, gloves, goggles, and training materials.

Armed with these agreements and new equipment, the rural fire departments assisting BLM, the Forest Service and Idaho Department of Lands in wildland firefighting are safer, more effective, and pretty excited to be working as our collaborative partner.

The true measure of success, however, comes from the people this program serves. The Curley Creek Volunteer Fire Department, recipient of the largest assistance funding in the amount of \$19,400, recently recognized the Upper Columbia Salmon-Clearwater District with a Certificate of Appreciation. Funding from BLM literally made dreams come true for the 12 Curley Creek volunteer fire fighters and the 335 residents they serve. The money has been used to make much needed repairs to their 1978 Ford, Type 3, Wildland Fire Engine that has been sitting idle and collecting dust since 1998 when it quit running due to engine, pump and transmission problems.

On a \$12,000 annual budget, made up of donations and contributions, the rural fire department could not come close to covering the repair costs to the engine. The Curley Creek Volunteer Fire Department chipped in \$2,000 and, along with the BLM funding for \$19,400 and a private donation in the amount of \$1,800, the engine is now more than just back in service. It is certified by the Idaho Department of Lands and the Kootenai National Forest Service and ready to fight wildland fires!

Contact: Bruce Martinek, Upper Columbia Salmon-Clearwater District (208) 769-5007

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Alaska

The Native village of Tanacross is in the Tanana River valley in Alaska's interior region. Surrounded by a dense stand of white spruce pole timber with transition to dense black spruce it was at risk for crown-type fires. In 2001, a unique approach to reduce wildfire threat and provide the Native community an opportunity to be a partner with BLM was initiated.



Tanacross, Alaska crew worked to hand-thin the fuel build up around their village.

Through BLM contracts, local people began work to hand thin vegetation around the village. The multi-year hazardous fuels reduction project reached its first major goal during winter 2002: the 16-member village crew finished a ten-foot-wide shaded fuel break through spruce trees on the 51 acre village of approximately 150 people.

On June 12, 2002, about 75 villagers gathered together with Alaska Fire Service and BLM personnel at the Tanacross community center to celebrate receiving a Unit/Group Award from BLM's NIFC for the Tanacross Fire Safety Project. Food laden tables welcomed fire personnel as the villagers held a potluck to celebrate.

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Wini Sorenson, Group Manager of Planning & Resources, National Office of Fire and Aviation in Boise, Idaho, presented a plaque for the village to Jerry Isaac, village council president.



Members of the Tanacross crew.

Crew members and Isaac received special Carhart brush jackets

embroidered with the Alaska Firewise logo, and Tami DeFries, Fire Management Officer for Military Lands with Alaska Fire Service, received a special plaque for her work on the project.

Success of the Tanacross Project derived from the proactive leadership of the village, which recognized the danger and directed the mitigation efforts, and the partnerships forged among the local, state, and federal entities with jurisdiction on the area. The use of local labor through a contract with the Village Council offered many benefits toward the success of the project.

Contact: Alaska State Office, (907) 271-5555

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Jerry Issac, Tanacross Village Council President and Wini Sorenson, BLM Group Manager share a laugh at the award ceremony.

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Nevada

Fire Education Corps creates fire-safe homes in Shantytown

The first line of defense against wildland fires this summer is more than just airborne fire retardant or a squadron of smoke jumpers; it includes 200-plus specially trained volunteers of the Student Conservation Association Fire Education Corps.



Student Conservation Association team clears brush in Shantytown, south of Elko, Nevada.

The SCA Fire Education Corps, consisting of college-age volunteers from around the nation, serves hundreds of high-risk communities in 14 western states with the potential for wildland urban-interface fires. Due to the increasing number of people who are seeking to escape the pressures of urban living and locating their homes in high-risk lands, the teams concentrate on rural communities where homes face a threat of wildland fire.

The SCA Fire Education Corps volunteers based in Elko, Nevada, recently organized and facilitated a fuels-reduction project in the community of Shantytown, located near the Ruby Lake National Wildlife Refuge in Ruby Valley, south of Elko. Shantytown was a focus for the volunteers due to its increasing potential for wildland fires. The volunteers stressed that with proper planning and community action, the trauma of losing a home can be prevented.

Shantytown, a small community of 53 properties, recently received two grants from the Nevada Division of Forestry, the BLM, and the United States Forest Service for community protection and prevention of wildland fires. Since more than a year might

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pass before projects funded by these grants get going, the team of five SCA volunteers saw this as an opportunity to make a difference in the community by helping homeowners create defensible space around their homes this summer.

The volunteers launched the project by presenting the plan at town meetings, and by canvassing and completing home evaluations. The actual fuels-reduction project commenced on August 9, and continued through the weekend. Participants included fourteen homeowners, twenty employees of the Forest Service, the Nevada Division of Forestry, the BLM and the Nevada Division of Wildlife, NDF and BLM fire crews and Elko SCA Fire Education Corps team.



Elko SCA team takes a break during their work clearing brush from around homes.



Nevada Division of Forestry crew loads the cleared fuels onto a truck.

The participants cleared sagebrush away from houses, moved woodpiles, pulled weeds and hauled nine truckloads of slash to the Gallagher Fish Hatchery burn pile.

From a two-state pilot project in 2001, the SCA Fire Educations Corps program expanded this summer to serve hundreds of high-risk wildland-urban interface communities in 14 mostly western states. The program also is growing in

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scope. In addition to last year's objectives of elevating public awareness and conducting home evaluations, this year's SCA volunteers are engaged in fuels reduction projects and GIS community mapping to assist local firefighters.

Prison Hill Fuels Treatment Project Gives Homes a Fighting Chance

Sixty-five Northern Nevada homes now have a fighting chance against potential wildland fires on nearby public lands. A BLM Carson City Field Office project has created a 2.1-mile long, 100-foot-wide fuel break between the houses and the wildlands.

The homes are located in southeast Carson City, on the west side of Prison Hill, which is a popular recreation area. About 3,000 acres of Prison Hill is managed by the BLM. Recreational activities on Prison Hill include hiking, mountain biking, horseback riding, wildlife viewing and off-highway vehicle use.

High-density residential areas are located at the base of Prison Hill, and many homes built right next to public land. Characteristics which make it a desirable place to visit also make it difficult to suppress wildland fire. Winds can be very strong, the terrain is steep and access is limited. These factors, combined with the heavy brush fuels, make the area highly susceptible to large, intense wildfires.

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Fuel conditions directly behind homes in Carson City, Nevada. Photo was taken in May 2002 before the fuels treatment. Reduced threat from fire was the result following the mechanical treatment project.

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The BLM Carson City Field Office, the Carson City Fire Department and local residents were very concerned about the risk of a fire damaging private property and burning a large part of the popular recreation area. Dense brush and grass had grown right up next to the high-density residential area on the west side of Prison Hill, making the homes difficult to defend.

The Carson City Field Office's fuels program manager designed a project to help protect these homes, and also minimize the spread of fires that might originate in the residential area. BLM awarded a contract to a local company to mow the dense brush and grass, creating a fuel break. After the fuel break had been cut, it was seeded with fire-resistant grass and brush species. The project was completed in July.

Local residents, along with state, federal and local agencies, were supportive of the project from conception to completion. The BLM involved the local residents and agencies by holding a scoping meeting and keeping them informed throughout the planning process through letters and phone calls. The Carson City Fire Department had recently completed a similar project on private property on the west side of Carson City, and has additional projects planned for next year.

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Reduced threat from fire was the result following the mechanical treatment project.